PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER MUSIC (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX
> **RELEASE** HOLIDAY

Rock Band

Twelve years ago, Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy founded a company not to create video games, but to explore technology that would allow non-musicians to discover music on a deeper level. Over a decade later, Harmonix is the name behind some of the most well known franchises in gaming - their company virtually synonymous with the music game genre they helped to establish. Critical triumphs Frequency and Amplitude established the familiar falling gem mechanic of later titles, though too few gamers would ever experience those early successes. Karaoke Revolution merged interactive scoring and pitch detection with the fun of singing along (badly) with our favorite tunes. In 2005, surprising its makers as much as it did the rest of the gaming industry, Guitar Hero was born and grew into a cultural phenomenon, bringing in people who had never even considered playing a video game before. With its simple to pick up gameplay, thousands of gamers were suddenly able to live out one element of their long-time rock and roll dreams - to turn the familiar air guitar experience on its head and create the illusion of playing along with the band on a real instrument. Their sequel, Guitar Hero II, expanded the fantasy to playing with a friend on bass. But what if you had even more control? What happens when all the backing tracks drop away, and you and your friends are the ones bringing music out of the silence? Those are the questions Harmonix wants to answer with its latest project. "We think of Rock Band as this amazing culmination point of the entire history of Harmonix music games," Harmonix co-founder and VP of engineering Eran Egozy explains. "We're taking all our previous concepts and jamming them all together into this colossal experience - a synthesis of everything we've ever done as a company."

The New Album

■ "Guitar Hero had a team of around 30. With Rock Band, the team is closer to 100. It's really something on just a different scale than what we've done before," Harmonix co-founder Eran Egozy explains

Rock Band may come out on only one disc, but in many ways it's like four full games in one. A solo guitar, singing, and drumming campaign can each be played independently from start to finish. In addition, a full band game is designed to allow for one huge cooperative playthrough for you and up to three friends – each of you tackling your favorite role. All four of you may be sitting together in a living room somewhere. However, this time, each one of you might be hundreds of miles apart from each other – Rock Band will feature full support for four-player online play on both 360 and PS3. You can even mix and match. Perhaps you and your brother want to play guitar and drums, but your best friend is away at college with his roommate, and they're up for bass and vocals. Any combination of off and online play will work, and each player can pick their own difficulty setting. A flexible community system will allow you to find bandmates anywhere in the world and hook up. While details remain under wraps, it seems as if the community system will offer some cool surprises in terms of sharing your band's triumphs with the world.

Gameplay in Rock Band should be immediately familiar to anyone who's played Harmonix's other games. While the franchise names may have passed to other publishers over the years, the original concepts behind those games still belong to Harmonix. Consequently, it won't be hard to find your way when you start, even though several new features now deepen the experience. Many have wondered how a full band game could present all the necessary tracks without cluttering the

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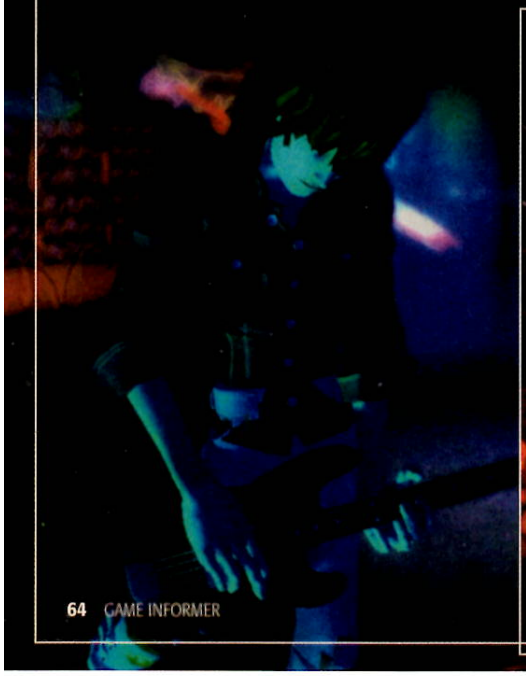


■ The HUD isn't final, but it gives a good idea how the game will handle four-player cooperative band play

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The four-part rock band includes a guitarist, bassist, drummer, and vocalist. In Rock Band, you can adopt the role of any one of the four, and for the first time Harmonix is creating its own instruments for you to pick between. With Guitar Hero, publishing partner Red Octane took on the task of putting together the peripheral guitar controller. This time, Harmonix is in the driver's seat as much with the hardware as the software.

The buttons are now more imbedded in the fret board than before

The GUITAR AND BASS

The new Fender Stratocaster will double as the instrument for both the guitarist and bassist in Rock Band, thus sacrificing some level of authenticity to allow for easier switching between roles in the band. Xbox 360 owners will be happy to know that their X-Plorer guitar controllers they spent so much money on for Guitar Hero II will definitely work for Rock Band. However, it could be tough to not run out and grab the new controller and the new features that go along with it. Through a partnership with Fender Guitars, the Rock Band guitar is an almost exact ¾ replica Strat. At a slight distance, some might not recognize the difference, from its trademark headstock shape to the cutaways in the body to allow for high fret access. Five familiar buttons dominate the lower frets, their colors now only visible on the side of the fret-board. Five new buttons sit high above near the guitar body. While the same colors adorn these buttons, a new feature in the game will allow players to jump to these high frets during certain challenging solo lines and play through those sections using only hammer-ons and pull-offs, freeing you from the required coordination with your strum bar. The signature Fender five-way switch has also been added. By shopping at the in-game store, you'll be able to purchase several virtual effects pedals, such as flange, wah, chorus, or echo. These can then be applied during your song by moving the five-way switch to your desired effect, further personalizing the sound you create. Two of the knobs near the base of the body are now replaced by the Start and Select (Back) buttons, making it easy once again to palm the Select button to deploy star power, like with the original PS2 Guitar Hero controller. All told, it's a remarkably cool and flexible peripheral.

The DRUMS

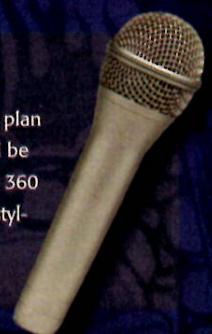
While Harmonix hadn't finalized every aspect of final drum set, they did have a working prototype that is unlikely to change dramatically before release. For purposes of consistency in laying out the notes, there doesn't appear to be a huge amount of flexibility for moving around the different pads. With that said, they've set up the drums to emulate the traditional set-up of a normal kit. The left-most pad, colored red, is your snare. Moving left from there, the yellow, blue, and green pads share duties as cymbals and toms, although when needed the yellow will almost always double as the high hat, and the far right green pad serves as the crash cymbal. A set of real wooden drum sticks will ship with the unit, letting you bang away to your heart's content. A firm metal stand hol the unit up, and can be adjusted to yo height preference. A lower piece of the stand can be removed so that the who unit will sit not on the floor, but instea on a nearby coffee table. Below, a sing kick pedal introduces the challenge of third limb in action, completing the set "If you've played the game for several months, and you're playing on hard or expert, then you're really playing the drums," co-founder Rigopulos excitedl tells us. "We could sit you down at a re drum set and have you start playing. That, as a payoff for playing a video game, is f---ing incredible!"

This isn't an exact representation of the drum set – Harmonix should reveal the final design soon. We crafted this picture from memory based on the time we played with the prototype

Artist's Rendition

The MICROPHONE

Nothing too exciting here, other than the fact that Harmonix does plan to release a Rock Band branded mic. Other USB microphones will be supported, but Harmonix will probably not allow the usage of the 360 headset mic – its fidelity just isn't very good. What sets the vocal stylings of Rock Band apart isn't the mic, but the word detection and tapping mechanic built into the gameplay (see p. 67)



Concept mic only

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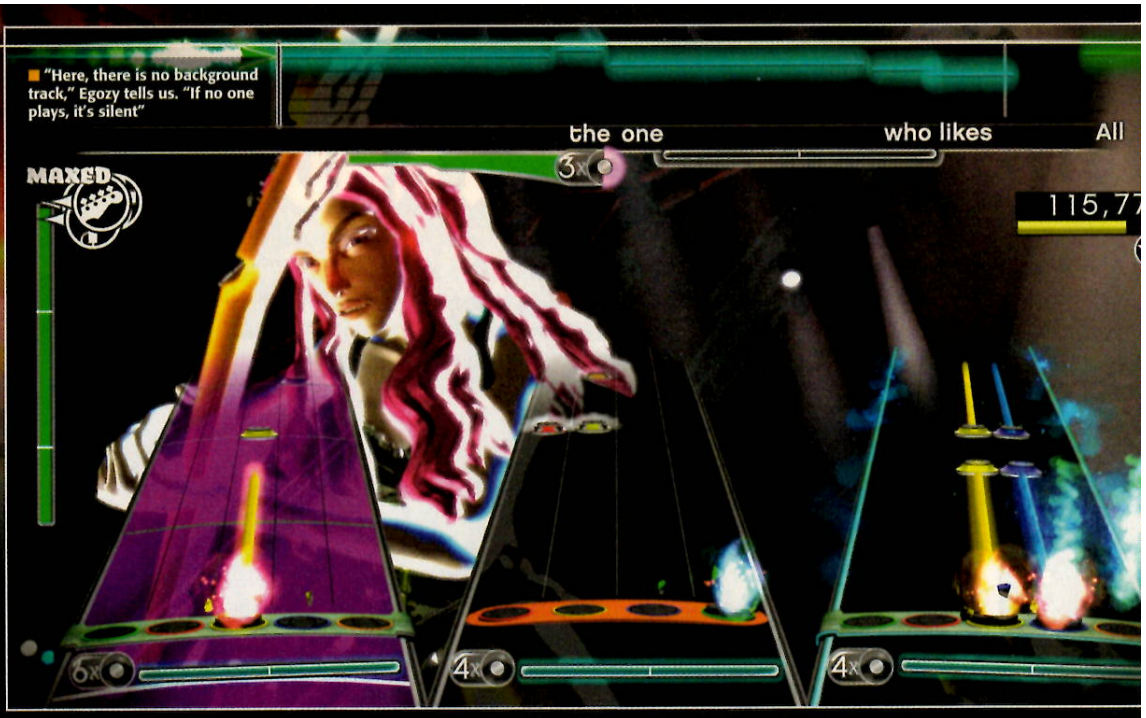
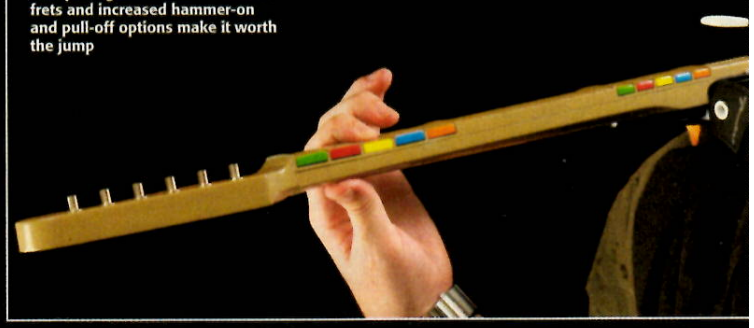
screen. The solution is relatively simple. In the version of the game we saw, the "fret boards" that slowly descend down the screen are now transparent, in order to better show off the exciting visual content behind them. Much like the stage setup of a real band, the guitar and bass tracks flow down the left and right sides of the screen, while the central track is reserved for drums. Flowing from right to left along the top of the screen are the vocal melody and lyrics, very much in the same fashion as we've seen in Karaoke Revolution.

As with previous games, guitarists and bassists will juggle up to five different colored gems as they descend. Newly added are the specially designated solo sections, which can be attempted on the new upper five frets. Fleshing out the customization of the sound provided by the whammy bar, the five-way switch allows for up to five different self-applied effects to the sound. As before, a well-timed tilt of the guitar sends you into some version of star power, but the team hasn't decided yet what to call this powerful overdrive mode.

Vocalists sing along to the rock tunes as they always have. Now, however, a

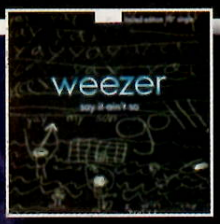


■ "Here, there is no background track," Egozy tells us. "If no one plays, it's silent"



■ The new upper buttons allow players to tackle those insane solo passages with ease – thinner frets and increased hammer-on and pull-off options make it worth the jump

ALL ABOUT The Music



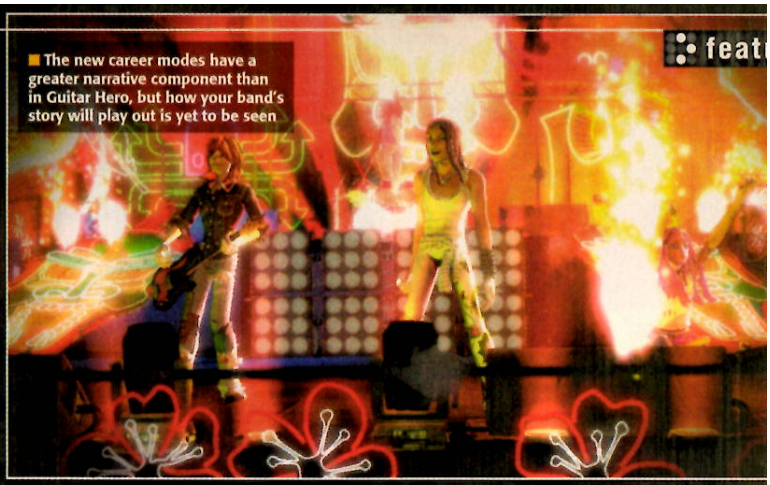
"The types of songs that we're looking for have a slightly different bent than with Guitar Hero II. For Guitar Hero, it was always about getting songs that people identified as these classic iconic guitar moments," Egozy tells us. "As for Rock Band, that'll still be the case with certain songs, but it's really all about the band, not necessarily what any one player is doing. We're looking for songs that are way more balanced for four players." With the backing of powerhouses like MTV and EA, and an established success story from Guitar Hero, Harmonix has a wealth of advantages behind them in garnering strong song licenses and, perhaps more importantly, the money to purchase them. The songs in the game represent the full history of rock, from the earliest genesis of '60s tunes to emerging top-of-the-charts hits. We got to play 10 full songs with the full four part band during our visit to Harmonix, but only four of them were finalized licenses that are definitely in the game.

Weezer – Say It Ain't So (Original Master Track)
Black Sabbath – Paranoid
The Who – Won't Get Fooled Again (Original Master Track)
Nirvana – In Bloom (Original Master Track)

These four songs represent a sampling of Harmonix's larger strategy. From the remarkable drum beats in "Won't Get Fooled Again" to singing along to the drawling tones of Kurt Cobain's melodic lines, there's a focus on genre variety and familiar tunes that you'll recognize and want to play. "Whenever possible, we're going after the original multi-track master recordings," Rigopulos informs us. "We're going after recording artists that have until now really been off limits for video games."

As for the other songs we got to play on our visit, it's fair to say that those on the revealed list definitely aren't the only gigantic names you'll be seeing. Further, Harmonix wants to put a huge focus on downloadable content this time around. From single songs to releasing an entire album from one band, they're hoping to use Rock Band as a new avenue through which the public can interact with old music they love, and new music they've never heard. "We want to fundamentally change the way people think about music," Egozy theorizes. "Rock Band is going to be used to launch new indie bands. There will be bands who become famous because of the game Rock Band." And while the disc's song list will focus on the various rock traditions, Harmonix is very open to exploring new genres in their downloadable content. Whether that means we'll be seeing country, jazz, blues, pop, or anything else is a question that will be answered only by how successful the game is, and what exactly the fans begin to cry out for.

You'll craft your own band logo, and the individual members of your band will show up in the background of loading screens between songs

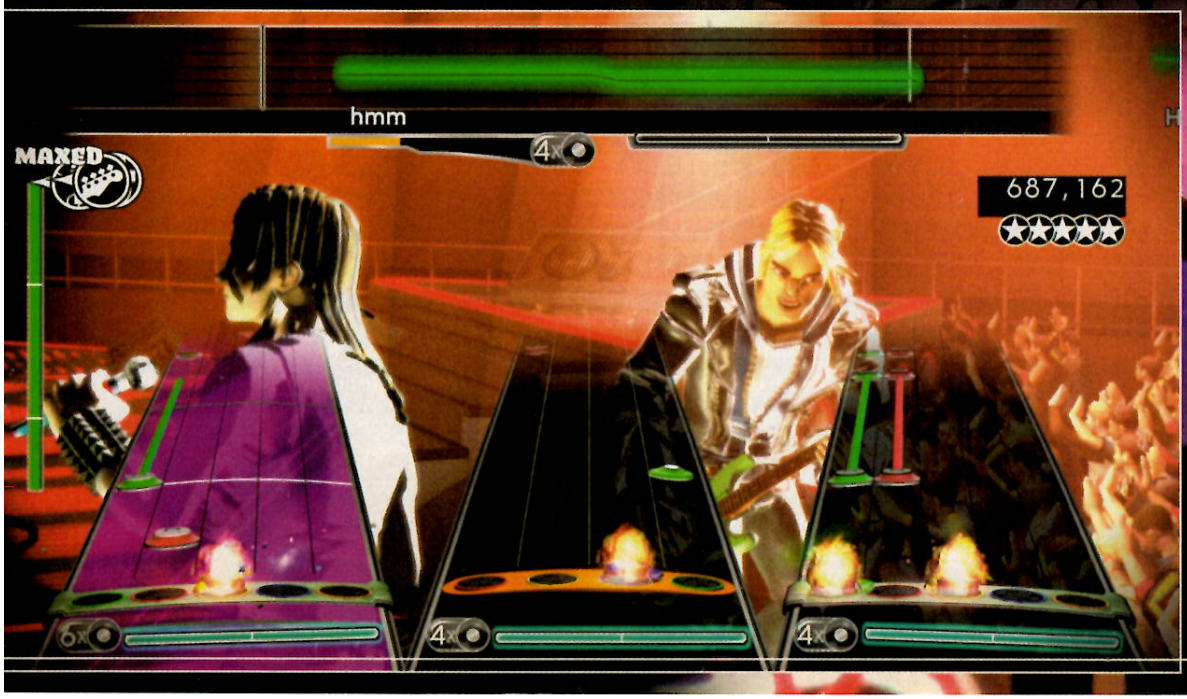


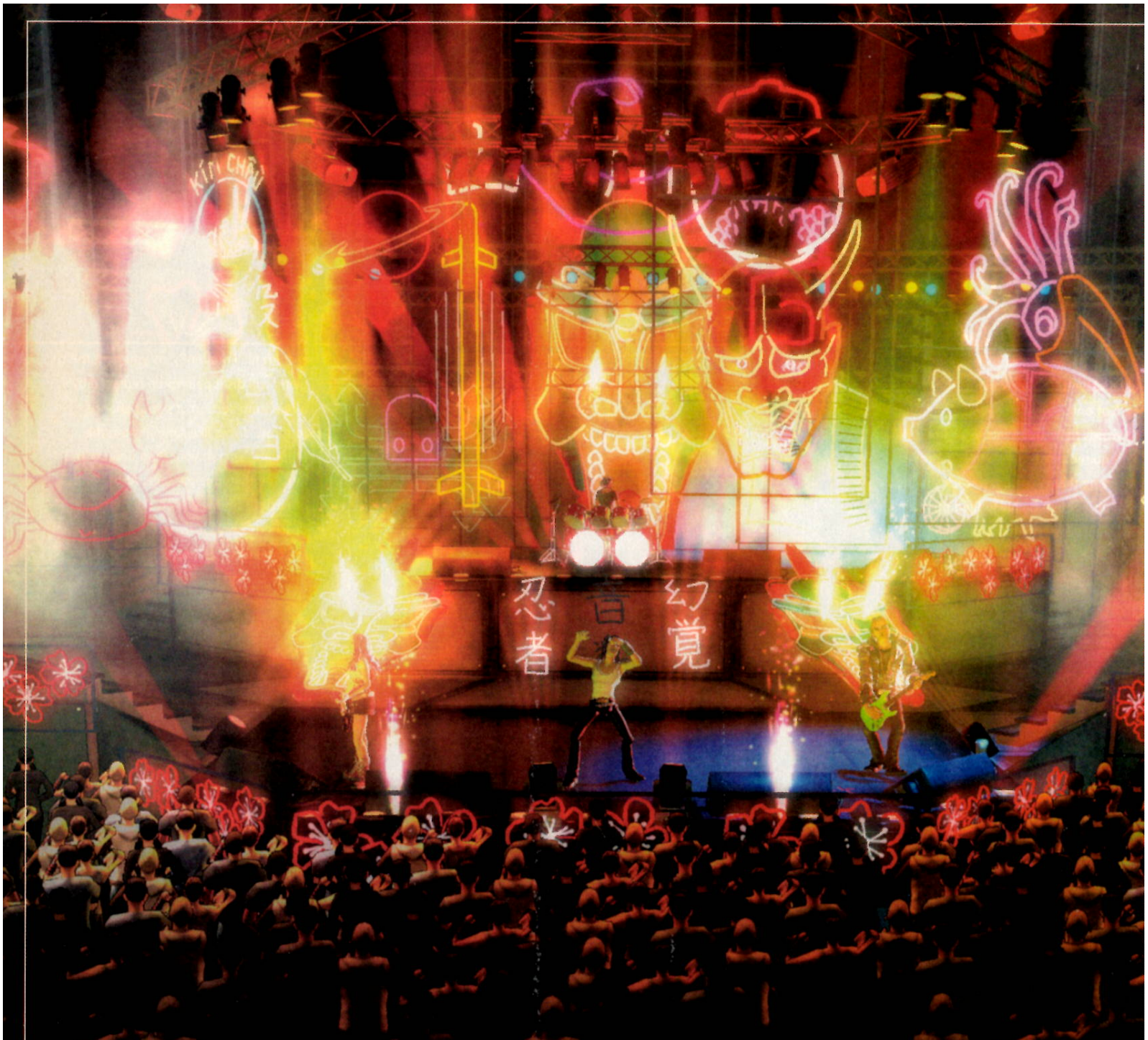
The new career modes have a greater narrative component than in Guitar Hero, but how your band's story will play out is yet to be seen

phoneme detector will pick up the individual vowels and consonants that you say. Not only does this encourage getting the words right, but it lets the game offer the required pitch-free speaking and screaming that is so core to rock singing. Build up enough highly judged phrases and you'll get a free-form passage to rock out. If your meter's high enough, singing in these free zones will trigger star power. Beyond that, any band vocalist knows how boring long instrumental solos can get. To address this, the mic doubles as the vocalist's own personal tambourine in many songs. Single note gems will scroll left to be hit at the right moment, and suddenly you're the backup percussionist as you tap away on the mic head. "They might even be cowbell phrases," Egozy hints.

Drums are the only fundamentally new gameplay mechanic in the game, and it's hard to overstate how awesome they are. For as many people who have wailed on an air guitar, there are just as many who have banged away on the car steering wheel as if they were god's gift to rhythm. For all those wannabe drummers, this is your game. Going far beyond other previous attempts to emulate drumming, the feeling here is remarkably close to the real thing. With drum sticks in hand, you hit each pad in front of you as the corresponding gem descends on screen. In addition to the four colored gems, a line will often cross underneath all of them that indicates it's time to hit the kick pedal – just like with the gems, you'll hit the pedal at the moment that the descending line reaches the base of the screen. Like every drummer who's ever picked up sticks, you'll have to keep your hands and feet independent, learn the basic patterns of rock drumming, and, as if that weren't enough, learn how to rock a drum fill. Frequently, as you play, the gems will disappear to be replaced by a free form section. It's your chance to throw down like Animal from the Muppets, or craft your own unique and intricate rhythmic passage. At the end of each drum fill, a special green gem descends on your right. Hit that for the final crash of your fill, and you've just deployed your own version of star power.

Unlike in previous games, with so many players working cooperatively, it would suck if one person's failure brought the whole band down. Instead, if you fail out your track will now go gra and you won't be able to play any more However, if your band mates are smart, one of them will deploy star power. Instead of giving him or her a huge multiplier, the action will instead pull yo and any other failed players back into the song. If you can all reach the end together, in many songs you'll be greete



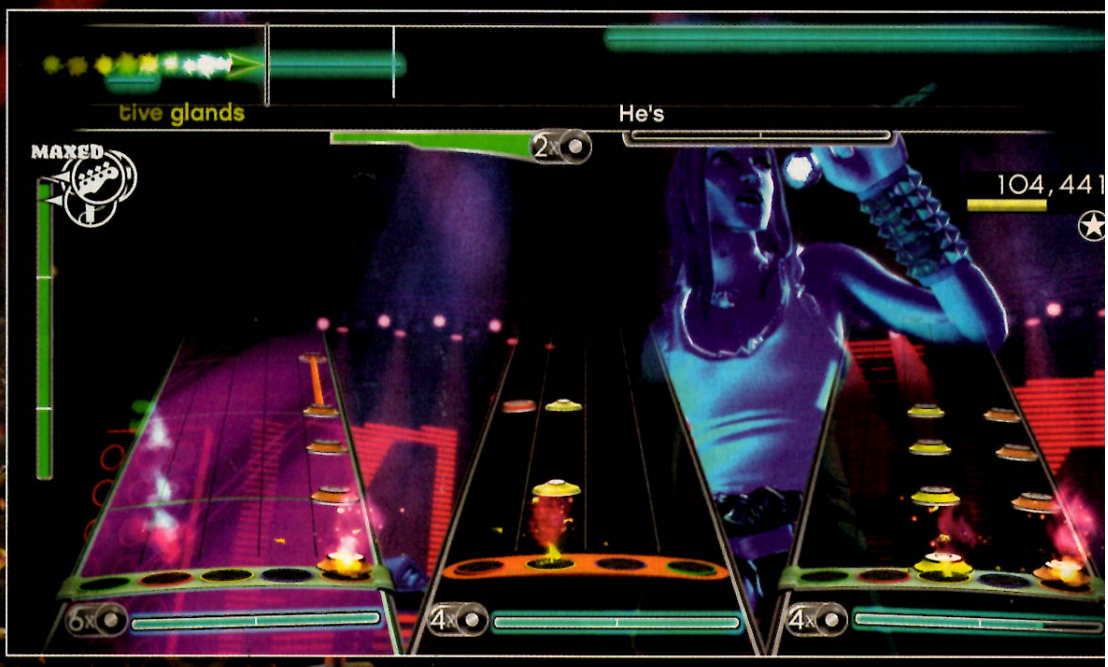


by the Big Rock Ending – a huge free-form passage for all the players that ends with a jump-in-the-air, guitar-smashing, amp-exploding crash.

Like any good band, you'll want to customize your style to say something about who you are. "For us, this game is about living out rock star fantasies," Rigopolus says. To this end, a brand new character creation system lets you craft your own unique avatar. Each avatar you make will play a particular instrument or sing, so you may make several for your different runs through the game. You'll set their gender, height, and physique as well as picking a face and hairstyle. Beyond the return of licensed guitars, pedals, and other rock paraphernalia, you'll also now have four themed clothing and accessory stores to outfit your character – Punk, Metal, Goth, and Classic Rock. Mix and match hundreds of pieces of clothing, jewelry, and tattoos from each of the four shops to create your own stand-apart rocker. Finally, a full set of motion-captured stage movements have been included for each of the four major genres on each instrument – you'll pick one to show off whether your musician rolls like Axl or stands his ground like Clapton. Alternately, in Quick Play mode you can choose between dozens of pre-fab characters that might strike your fancy. Whatever your choice, your band will perform in a hugely expanded array of venues – there are around 40 performance spaces planned right now.

Whether alone or with friends, or online with strangers on the other side of the country, Rock Band is just a first step to broadening a genre and bringing people closer to the music. "While this is a culmination of 12 years of experience, in another sense it's really just the beginning," Rigopulos opines. "This is the game that we hope can reestablish the context for the music game genre, and serve as the beginning for the next 10 years of music games." The concept of Rock Band is amazing, and having now played it, we know it is just as exciting as we hoped. Even so, it's a level of fun

■ Sorry, bassists, your parts can be a little too repetitive to make for a full career, but at least you can play solo bass in quick play mode



■ The peripherals will be unique to each platform: "If we had our druthers, the peripherals would work across all platforms," CEO Alex Rigopulos says. "The tech would work, but there are special circuits that Microsoft requires that other console manufacturers don't"

that's unlikely to come cheap. While no one is willing to talk prices yet, outfitting a full band with peripherals of this quality is a scary concept. Then again, it can be hoped that the spirit of cooperation embodied by the band concept can let friends pool resources and experience Rock Band the way it should be played – with four people. Whatever cost barrier exists, it'll be a hard purchase to turn down. Rock Band has every sign of being the definitive party game experience of 2008. ■■■